

In Which Santa Claus Comes to Town by the-singular-peep

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Humor

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B., Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-29 19:28:15

Updated: 2018-01-29 19:28:15

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:31:26

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,819

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Eleven knew about Santa Claus. From all the hype on the television, how could she not? Eleven, however, did not know the first thing about Christmas traditions, or what joy they could bring. [IN WHICH EVERYTHING IS OKAY SERIES. COMPLETE. PART 6/?. PART 5: "IN WHICH THE DEMOGORGAN GETS REKT." MILEVEN. JOPPER. PARTY BONDING. ALL CHARACTERS.]

In Which Santa Claus Comes to Town

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December 18 - 25, 1984. Tuesdays.

Eleven knew about Santa Claus. One night a few weeks ago she had asked Mike in fear about the man, quite afraid that no one had *stopped* this snack-stealing menace yet, and Mike had gone that funny shade of pink he only turned around her before beginning to explain. The other kids who were seated in various positions across the basement struggled to hold in their laughter. One stern look from Mike told them not to spoil the fun before he had a chance to explain.

"Santa's not - He doesn't steal anything. He-" Mike cut himself off and paused, as if he was pondering. (He really was pondering something - Whether to let El live her childhood out a little late or to ruin the facade of Santa before she even knew anything about him. He chose the former, because who *didn't* want to believe in Santa? Well, other than Lucas, but that was because he had walked in on 'Santa' grabbing his mother's rear end at ten pm on his sixth Christmas, and he had called the police. One frantic apology to the 911 operator and a serious conversation later, Lucas was ready to forget Santa was ever an option.)

Mike took a deep breath, as well as Eleven's hand, and shot a look at his friends. Somehow they got the message to play along. One by one, the boys and Max filed over to the couch the two were sharing and sat, only Dustin and Lucas making little kissy faces at Mike before they settled. Mike continued.

"Santa is like magic. He doesn't steal stuff, it's just like, If you leave cookies for him, he'll eat them." Mike smiled, and he could tell that Eleven was deep in thought trying to comprehend the story.

"He's like a rat," Dustin supplied, grinning and ready to put his own twist on things, "He works for the cookies. If you don't feed him, he'll just stop bringing presents. Probably pass out." Dustin thought a minute, and laughed. "Maybe Santa has diabetes."

Eleven made a face and looked at Dustin. "Dia-bee-tees?" She sounded out each syllable carefully, trying to understand. Mike rolled his eyes at Dustin and squeezed El's hand, getting her to look at him again.

"That's not the point. The point is, Santa won't steal your food, so there's nothing to worry about. He's just a jolly, happy old guy who likes to make kids happy, so he leaves presents. Anything you, want, Santa will leave for you."

Mike realized what he had said at the cough and look Lucas gave him, and quickly revised it.

"Well, almost anything. Sometimes Santa can't get *everything* you want, but he tries really hard."

Eleven cocked her head.

"How?" She asked. It was Mike's turn to cock his head.

"How what?"

"Santa knows. How?"

Will took this one, putting a hand gently on Eleven's shoulder. She jumped a little, her breath catching in her chest, but she recovered quickly as she turned to look and saw who it was. She and Will were still very close, and his touch felt safe.

"He's magic." Will smiled softly. "Santa knows everything you want him to know."

Eleven brightened a little.

"Like Mike." She said, and Mike turned that funny shade of pink again at the mention of their connection. Will giggled, because Mike had talked to him about the nonverbal communication that he and El shared, and amended his sentence.

"No, no, Santa knows what *everyone* wants him to know. He brings everyone presents, all the kids around the world, because of his magic sleigh and reindeer."

Eleven nodded, slowly, methodically, as if she were contemplating deep philosophy.

"People think Santa comes down the chimney." Lucas said, trying to remain neutral despite his strong stance on the subject. He thought tricking children was cruel - he could never get that image of Santa and his mom out of his head - but he supposed El was old enough, and smart enough, to decipher the truth if she really wanted to, so he did his best to play along. "But my sister always got scared he'd get stuck, so we told her- We *thought* that he came through the door. Comes through the door. Still."

Eleven smiled.

"Like Big Bird?" She asked. Dustin made a face, and Lucas looked confused, but Mike got it. He had a four year old sister. Of *course* he got it.

"Yeah, like Big Bird. Santa's just magic, so even though Big Bird lives in a nest without a chimney, Santa still brings him presents." Mike smiled. He didn't care that his girlfriend loved little kid shows; if he was honest with himself, he liked them pretty well, too. They were all friendly, and colorful, and were just exactly what Eleven needed to get accustomed to her new normal. Now, Mike wouldn't exactly call himself a *Rainbow Brite* fan, but he could get behind *Fraggle Rock* and *Sesame Street* just as much as Eleven did. He even knew the exact Christmas Special she was referring to, seeing as he, Holly and their mother had sat down to watch it just the night before.

Mike was sure his friends would laugh and tease him for knowing Sesame Street trivia later, but for now they stayed quiet. They didn't tease El for liking childish or weird things, not ever. Part of that was because they knew she never got a chance to be a child when she was younger.

Part of that was because she could snap their legs in .02 seconds without even moving a muscle.

"So.. Santa comes, without chimney?" Eleven asked, leaning forward. Mike nodded, and Dustin decided to chime in with, "I hear he climbs in through the vents."

"You have to go to sleep early, though," Will said seriously from behind her. Eleven turned and looked at him, and a little frown appeared on her lips. She had lots of trouble sleeping, and, when she did get to sleep, she had even more trouble staying asleep because of her still-present nightmares. Lucas noticed her discomfort and leaned over.

"But you can always just fake it. That's what Erica does, and she still gets presents. That little demon never sleeps." He laughed, and Dustin nodded solemnly. He had met Erica many times, and he wholeheartedly agreed.

Lucas continued.

"People do a whole lot of different things other than just wait for Santa, though. Like, my family does this whole tree-lighting ceremony the day after Thanksgiving, and Dustin's family always has a cookie decorating contest."

Dustin shrugged when El looked to him.

"I never stand a chance. Mews always won."

Mike cut in before Eleven could ask about Mews, because he knew cats were a sore spot with El, and he squeezed her hand before he started talking.

"Yeah, and me and Holly and Nancy always watch movies and Mom makes pie and Dad reads the Christmas story from the Bible on Christmas Eve. Everyone does different stuff, and that's what makes it so special." Eleven nodded with a smile, putting the word *Bible* in her back pocket to ask about later, and turned to Will. He answered almost instantly.

"We watch *Rudolph*, and Jonathon fixes hot chocolate because Mom doesn't do it right." He laughed. Eleven laughed, too, because she knew how Joyce's cooking usually went.

Eleven looked around the room, now noticing that Max had remained silent. She was seated beside Lucas on the floor, and her eyes were watching her fingers delicately pick at the carpet. It wasn't as if

Eleven didn't *like* Max - The two had met a few times since *That Night*, and Eleven had apologized profusely and offered a gift of atonement for her behavior. Max had accepted the rock that Eleven had meticulously picked out from her back yard and had punched Eleven's shoulder with a little smile.

"Don't worry about it. You're really badass, El. I respect that."

And now the two were *almost* friends, or at least, El *wanted* to be friends, but they hadn't quite reached that level of trust yet. Eleven wanted to see if she could further their friendship by including her in the conversation.

"Max?" She asked, and all the boys' attention went to the silent redhead. She looked up immediately, blue eyes startled, and sat up slowly. She shrugged.

"I-I mean, we don't really *do* much for Christmas," She started, blushing as if she was caught off guard. "Not since Billy and Neil moved in, I mean. They don't celebrate it, so now we don't, either. When Lucas came over last week and didn't see a tree, he thought we were Mormon."

Lucas blushed a little at that, but stayed quiet. Instead, Will voiced a thought.

"That shouldn't change anything," He said, a quizzical look on his face. "Mom's Jewish, but my dad was Baptist so we always celebrated both."

Max shrugged.

"I don't know. I guess mom just cares too much about what they think to do it anymore."

The room got quiet for a minute.

"I can't believe you guys are making me do this." Mike said suddenly, standing up.

"What?" Dustin said, slightly irritable at the accusation.

"I can't believe you guys are making me host a Christmas party." Mike turned to them, and his face was full of delight. "I mean, El's never had a Christmas, and Max hasn't had a good one in a while, so we have to make up for it. This week. Thursday, when school lets out early."

Thursday came faster than they were expecting, and when the time came all of them were nearly bouncing with excitement. Eleven had been dropped off at the Wheeler's early in the morning, per their new arrangement that Hopper lovingly titled the "Keep Eleven Out of My Hair" plan. El would go to be taught and watched by Karen on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and today was spent mainly decorating and planning for the party. Mike and the Party were at school until eleven thirty, and so until then it was up to Karen, Eleven, and Holly to get the house fixed up and ready. They did the dishes, and set the table, and made sure the Christmas tree was just so, and by 10:45, El was having the joy of baking her first Christmas cookies.

"Okay, girls, so what you want to do it press this little cutter down into the dough." Karen explained to Holly and El. Eleven was looking at her intently, but Holly was already well on her way to decapitating a gingerbread man she had already cut out. She was an old pro at this.

Eleven very delicately pushed down on her own Christmas tree cutter, her eyes flicking between the pressed-dough and Karen. The woman smiled and nodded.

"Yep, just like that."

Within fifteen minutes, Holly had eaten about a third of the dough in little bites while her mother was turned away, the cookies were in the oven, and Eleven was covered from head to toe in flour and sugar.

"Okay, girlie-bugs, let's get cleaned up." Karen laughed, looking at the mess. Holly whipped her head around and looked up at her like a deer in the headlights, dough she had been hiding in her overall pocket halfway up to her mouth. Karen swatted it from her hand and Holly stuck out her tongue, and Eleven laughed. She liked Christmas

traditions.

By noon, all of the Party was at the Wheeler home, sitting around the table for a Christmas lunch filled with sandwiches and all kinds of baked goods and candies, and they were chatting exuberantly about their weeks and plans for the break.

It was all a little overwhelming for Eleven, but she loved it all the same. She loved her loud, excitable friends, and their laughs and yells and petty arguments, their milk-snorting laughs and borderline food-fights, even if she had to sit back in her chair and cover her ears sometimes to make it not so loud. Mike noticed this once when she had to, and asked silently if she was okay with a hand on her shoulder and a concerned look. She nodded, smiling, and Mike smiled back, leaving his hand on her shoulder and consciously making his voice softer.

After lunch was Dirty Santa, which Eleven still wasn't quite sure the meaning of, but she supposed Santa got dirty with all the chimney and vent spelunking, so she didn't ask.

It was just the kids in the room, and things got a little hectic. Max explained the rules in a question, to make sure that it was the same as the White Elephant exchange they had in California, and Eleven "ohhhh"ed in understanding.

It was a gift exchange, and you could steal other presents if you liked them better, if it was your turn. She thought she got it, but she still sat very close to Mike and asked him whose turn it was each time, just in case.

Lucas opened a Dreamtime Barbie, Will a big scratch 'n' sniff sticker book, and Mike a scented candle that he was sure belonged to someone's mother, when it was El's turn.

She picked a small bag in the center because it had a pretty red bow on it, and then sat down next to Mike to open it.

She did not notice Dustin's horrified face in time, and by the time he was able to voice his warning, she had already pulled the gift from the bag.

There, in Eleven's hands, sat a very fancy looking bra adorned with decorative lace. It was bright red, and see through on the upper half, and Dustin's face was one of absolute mortification.

Mike's was just about as red as the bra.

"Uhm, that was - I meant to-" Dustin sputtered as the dam broke and Max and Lucas began cackling. "That was meant for one of those losers!" Dustin finally shouted, gesturing wildly to the half of the circle where his fellow boys sat. Max laughed and bent in two.

"Where did you even get that, you *perv*?!" She grinned.

"It was under the seat of the car when I cleaned out Steve's car last month! I just thought it'd be funny, I'm so, so sorry El," Dustin tried, reaching for the bra. "I'll take that one, you pick another."

To his surprise, Eleven pulled the red lingerie away from Dustin's hand and held her chin up high.

"No." She told him, struggling not to giggle. Instead, she pulled the bra on over her head, clasping the back under her chin and adjusting the cups over her curls. "Good hat."

Max was wheezing now, rolling around on the floor, but the boys were sharing a look of horror.

"El, that's-" Mike started, because he was sure he and the rest of the party were thinking the same thing. El didn't know what that was. She didn't know what she was doing. She was being cute, and innocent, and didn't understand that the red garment was meant for mature ladies. Mike was about to explain it's actual use, but one look at El's twinkling eyes told him that she already knew.

That look at Mike caused El to burst just like Max, and she was giggling harder than the boys had ever seen her before. Lucas fell backwards in a mock scream that turned soon into a laugh, and Will was tearing up from his own laughter. Mike laughed an out of breath, relieved laugh, and Dustin just gaped.

"She *played* us!" He shouted, his face that of utter disbelief. "Little Miss Innocence herself played us!"

Mike covered his mouth in realization as he looked at the bra fixed around Eleven's curls and gasped.

"You guys." He said seriously. No one heard. "You guys!" He tried again, more forcefully this time. The laughing halted, mostly, for a moment, and they all looked at him. Eleven looked concerned, so concerned that she almost pulled the underwear off of her head, but, just like before, the eyes gave it away and Eleven was the first to giggle. Mike looked back to the group so he wouldn't laugh himself and shared his revelation. "That's one of Nancy's bras!"

And the cackling began all over.

It was nearly time for Hopper to be there for Eleven when the party started to die down. Lucas and Max had walked back to Lucas' house, because his parents were offering her a ride home and Lucas would *not* miss out on sitting next to her in a car, Dustin had biked home because it was his turn to clean the litter box and his mom would kill him if he was late (Eleven was very concerned at this phrase, and almost flipped Dustin's bike when she tried to stop him from leaving with her mind because she didn't think he should go back if someone would kill him, but that was explained very quickly to her by Mike), Joyce had arrived to pick Will up for dinner five minutes ago, and that left just Mike and Eleven, waiting patiently in the living room for Hopper to arrive. Mike sighed contentedly, because Eleven was sleepy and whenever she was sleepy she would lay her head on Mike's shoulder and hug his arm, as they sat in a comfortable silence. He looked around the room, and was about to comment on what a good job that Eleven had done helping with decorations when he saw it.

Scratch that. It wasn't just Mike and El.

It was Mike, El, and *mistletoe*. And the mistletoe was right in the arch separating the living room from the entryway, where they had to pass under to get to the door. Mike's eyes widened, and his heart picked up the pace, because they had only kissed twice before and he wasn't sure if Eleven would want to, but at the same time he wanted to very much. Eleven must have noticed a disturbance, because she shifted and looked up to him with those big doe eyes, a look of concern on

her face.

"Mike?" She asked, and then, *Are you alright?*, but that part was unspoken. Mike nodded, swallowed, and pointed, looking at her.

"There's mistletoe." He said. Eleven nodded.

"Yes. I put it there." She said seriously, looking Mike dead in the eyes. He turned back to the decor.

"Do you... Uhm, do you know what Mistletoe means?" He asked. When he looked back, Eleven was smiling her little closed-lipped smile, and her eyes were twinkling again.

"Yes. Holly said."

Mike nodded, hunching his shoulders and leaning over with his elbows propped on his knees. His eyes were wide and his mind was racing.

"Alright. Cool."

And then Eleven stood, took his hand, and was dragging him over to the entryway.

"El, what-" Mike began, and then her lips were on his and it was a very warm gesture. Mike kissed back, though that didn't entail much as it was only a peck, but still. It felt like magic, just as it had the first two times, and when they pulled away, breathless, Mike was smiling. Eleven giggled.

"Christmas." She said. Mike then got brave, just as Eleven had, and leaned over to kiss El's cheek.

"Merry Christmas to you, too,"

Before she knew it, Eleven was enveloped in a big, lanky hug - her favorite kind because they were from her favorite person - and she smelled his signature scent of spices and garage, and he smelled her's of warm caramel and strawberries, and then there was Hopper, banging on the door and saying he'd been knocking for five minutes, and he could see them through the glass, and if they didn't open the

door now he was going to break it down.

Christmas Eve, 1984

Hopper grunted when he looked at the calendar. The 24th of December- Christmas Eve.

Last year at this time, Hopper hadn't thought much of Christmas. He had gone to the work party early in the evening, left his mystery girl in the woods some food, and gone home. He took an early shower and went to sleep at eight, and the next morning he had woken at seven and had done a whole lot of nothing all day.

Then three days later, he had found Eleven.

Naturally, the two did not celebrate a late Christmas. For weeks, Hopper was simply trying to get Eleven accustomed to living in a real home and eating real food, and the holidays didn't even cross his mind. The first week was spent staying up all night with her nightmares, and from then on there was the bed-wetting, and inability to eat whole servings, and then the refusal to eat anything but Eggos. (El had gone straight from scared little animal to stubborn little girl). Then in January, Eleven had gotten terribly sick and that had been all Hopper could think of, and by the time things had settled down a little, the holidays were long past.

Now it was December 24th of the next year, and Hopper had no idea what to plan to make this special for his daughter's first Christmas.

He had explained Christmas and Santa to her, of course - to much confusion from Eleven, and then fear at the idea of a fat man breaking into your house and taking your food (That conversation had taken place on the way to the Wheeler's one morning, and instead of explaining it himself he had pushed her into the house and told her to ask Mike) - but they hadn't made a plan. He had sent Eleven to Mike's house with a drug-store gift for a little party and secret Santa (To which he arrived to pick her up to see much kanoodling from the young couple), and from Karen he had heard about the decorating, and cookies, and the few games that were planned. She came home just talking in her little Eleven way about

all the goings on at the party, even stopping and just giggling at one point and never explaining why. Hopper loved that she had a good time, but also wanted his Christmas with her to be better. He knew that would be hard to do, because he was just boring old Hop and not ever-endearing Mike, but he could try. However, he had no idea *how* to attempt that. He had bought her some things- some new clothes, tasteful makeup, a series of stuffed animals, a few books and a doll or two - but that was it.

Now it was the day of, and he had no clue what to do to make the night special. Just as he was having that thought, at 7 am on a Monday dressed in his fleece pajama pants and leaning over a pan of bacon, the phone rang.

He rolled his eyes and sighed, because he hated the phone, but before he could answer he heard little feet pattering through the house. He didn't even have time to remind Eleven to be cautious before he heard her little voice answering an unheard question.

That was a little odd, because ever since he had begun permitting her to pick up the phone the week before, she had developed a bad habit of just standing and breathing into the receiver without saying anything. However, if she was talking, he knew it had to be to someone safe. Before he could ponder it more, or take the bacon off the stove, a little body slammed into his waist and a hand was thrusting the phone in front of his face.

"Joyce." Eleven said plainly as he took the telephone. Hopper put it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Hop! Your daughter tells me that Santa comes tonight, " The cheery voice of Joyce Byers chirped, and Hopper could practically feel her smile.

"Yep, that he does. What can I help you with, Joyce?" Hopper asked, keeping his focus on the way Eleven was trying desperately to unwrap herself from the telephone cord.

"Well, Will had asked, and I was hoping-" And then Hopper couldn't

hear her anymore, because he had dropped the phone and was catching El by the arm as she nearly toppled to the ground. He set her back on her feet by the arm and tousled her hair when she looked up at him with an expression of fear.

"You're fine, kiddo. Don't get yourself wrapped up like that, okay?"

Eleven nodded at the instruction and rubbed at her arm, and Hopper bent down to pick up the phone again.

"Sorry 'bout that." Hopper said gruffly into the receiver. He started and then stopped again, remembering not to say any name that could be connected with Eleven over the phone. "Kid decided she was gonna be an acrobat and it didn't go quite as planned."

Joyce laughed for a moment before continuing.

"Will and I were just wondering... if maybe you and yours would like to come over tonight? Will says he wants to make her Christmas extra special this year. We could have.. I don't know, hot chocolate, and popcorn and watch a movie... And.. If you two wanted, maybe you could...stay the night?"

Hopper loved the way her voice lilted up at the end, as if she was expecting him to be able to resist a request that she, Joyce Byers, had made.

"Aren't you Jewish?" Hopper asked bluntly, trying to recall from highschool. He heard Joyce audibly sigh.

"Well.. Yes and no, I mean, Lonnie and I.. We shared the holiday. The boys share a Menorah to light and each had a little Christmas tree in their rooms. It just kind of stuck after he left." Joyce paused, and Hopper heard a watery laugh. *"And you know I'm all for the Christmas lights."*

Hopper didn't respond, thinking of that day last year when he had found Joyce in her home surrounded by lights and letters. Her voice broke his train of thought.

"Please, Hop. Come over. The boys and I would be glad for you two to be here."

Hopper smiled a little just thinking about how El would love to spend this with her friends. And how he would love to spend it with Joyce.

"Let me check with the kiddo." He said, then put a hand over the receiver and looked to Eleven.

She was currently glaring at the phone cord and tying it up in knots with her mind, just to show her distaste for how it had tripped her. When she noticed Hopper looking at her, she looked up at him and wiped her nose with her sleeve. Hopper shook his head, smiling.

"You weirdo," He chuckled, and she stuck her tongue out at him, but it was all in good fun. "How do you feel about stayin' with Joyce and the boys tonight and celebrating Christmas?"

"Yes! Yes!" Eleven said, grinning and nodding emphatically. "Please, Hop, please!"

"We'll be there." Hop grinned to Joyce over the phone. She said an excited "See you then!" before hanging up, and Hopper turned to El. As soon as he had spoken to Joyce, he had gotten an idea - and if they were very careful - if she dressed inconspicuously, and he kept her close, and they went to a locally owned shop - maybe this could work. He patted her shoulder.

"Alright then kiddo. Go get dressed and we'll shop some, okay?"

And that is how the two found themselves in the Byers' living room at nine PM on a Monday, Hopper festooned with a Christmas hat and his arm around Joyce while Will and Eleven sat cross-legged on the floor with their eyes glued to the television.

"Yeah, that's Hermie again," Will said, pointing. Eleven scrunched up her face to think.

"Didn't go to elf practice?" She asked, trying to clarify which character was which. Will nodded.

"Yup, same one. When I was little I told mom I wanted to be a dentist when I grew up just because Hermie did. I liked his hair." Will laughed, and Eleven giggled, too.

Jonathon was in the kitchen stirring a pan of hot chocolate when he heard the two younger kids laughing, and he peeped into the living room and smiled.

Will and Eleven had changed into their pajamas about an hour ago, Will now dressed in a blue striped set and Eleven in a yellow polka dotted one, and the sight of the two of them seated on the floor surrounded by popcorn bits was quite endearing. Even more so, however, was his mother, sitting on the couch and leaning heavily on the chief of police, who had his hand tangled in her hair.

Jonathon knew they weren't dating yet. The wound was still open from the loss of Bob - that man had truly loved his mother and she had loved him right back - but, while they weren't in love, per se, Hopper made his mother feel safe and cared for, and just seeing the way she was around him made Jonathon smile.

Plus Hopper was wearing a Christmas hat. *That* made him smile, too. He had to get a picture of this.

Very quietly, and after turning off the burner so the hot chocolate wouldn't scorch, Jonathon moved over to the table and picked up his camera. He was going to take it slow and easy, to get the best shot possible of the people without them noticing so it would be genuine and candid, but before he could he heard voices.

"Where are you going?" His brother's voice asked, and it was El's that responded.

"Marshmallows."

Jonathon heard the sound of someone getting up, and he knew if he waited much longer the moment would be lost. And so, he began to move hastily towards the doorway with his camera in tow. He didn't even think about the fact that he was wearing socks, or that the floors were hardwood, and before he knew it, Jonathon was sliding into the living room like a regular photography ninja, his legs splayed and hands holding the camera for dear life.

Maybe, just maybe he would have been unnoticed if he hadn't shouted. But he was caught off guard by the slipping of his feet, and

that surprise outed itself as a shout. Instantly the family looked up, El from her place standing ready to go raid the kitchen.

"Smile!" Jonathon laughed, because his mother had already started smiling at him and Will was laughing at how he burst into the room so unexpectedly, but El and Hopper were less than amused.

El was on a mission for sugar, and she was caught very much off guard.

Hopper was smitten with Jonathon's mother, and he was caught very much off guard.

The picture that resulted was one that Jonathon would keep forever. His mother had a kind and warm smile on her face as she laughed, one leg drawn up under her as she leaned over to put a hand on Hopper's leg. Will sat on the floor by the couch, legs beginning to stretch out, his eyes closed in laughter and his teeth showing.

And then there were El and Hopper, El standing with one fist clenched and the other open in surprise, Hopper sitting with one leg propped on the other and his arm around Joyce, and both of them were wearing the exact same expression. It was a look that conveyed disgust, annoyance, confusion and surprise all in one, and Jonathon almost cackled when he saw how *alike* they looked.

And then El was at his feet, her head barely reaching his armpit, and she was telling him without words that she was in desperate need for some marshmallows, and that he should help her in her quest.

"Please," She added to her unspoken request, and Jonathon laughed. He set the camera on the chair beside him and began off toward the kitchen, still laughing at the look on the house guests' faces. He'd have to remember to put that in the album later.

Eleven was having quite a good time tonight, and her excitement for tomorrow was only causing her night to get even better. She pulled Jonathon into the kitchen by his sleeve, because while she was comfortable enough around the Byers family to go forage for her own food in the their kitchen, she wasn't quite sure where they kept anything. Jonathon was a good choice in helping her find the

marshmallows, because, from what Eleven had heard and experienced, he was the only Byers that actually knew how to and enjoyed cooking.

"Want to get them yourself?" He asked El as they entered the kitchen, and the smaller child nodded. Jonathon nodded an "Alright," before boosting her up onto the counter in front of them. She got on her knees on the counter as Jonathon pointed the right cupboard out, and after her target was located and snatched up, she didn't move to get down. Instead, she turned to look at her friend's big brother, and she looked him straight in the eyes. She had a question.

"Does Santa really come in through the vents?"

Jonathon looked up, surprised.

"Does.. Does what?" He asked, almost startled to laughter.

"Dustin said. No chimney, comes in vents." El explained. Jonathon shook his head, chuckling.

"You know, I don't think he'd fit." He grinned. Eleven looked perplexed.

"No chimney. How?" She demanded. Jonathon thought a moment. Will had stopped believing in Santa Claus two years ago, but before that it had been Jonathon's job to keep the story alive.

"Well.. He's just magic." Jonathon finally decided. "And if you've been good, and are asleep when he gets here, then he'll be able to leave you presents."

Eleven nodded, then looked back up to Jonathon. She was frowning.

"Is.. Is Santa real?" She asked, because it all seemed a little silly to her, no matter how much she liked the story. Jonathon glanced back to the living room, because he wasn't sure what all Hopper wanted his daughter to know. He didn't want to *lie*, but he also wanted to keep the Christmas magic alive, at least for El's first one. He smiled.

"Well, that's for you to just wait and see."

After laying out a plate of Oreos, a good teeth brushing, and being tucked (a ritual El had become accustomed to and one Will could never refuse) the two tweens lay awake in their respective sleeping places. El was piled onto the floor In Will's old sleeping bag, her dollar store bear tucked up under her chin as she lay beside the bed, and Will was lying on his back in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He loved Christmas and Hannukah, not just for the presents, but for what it signified.

Christmas was the first big event after Will really came home the first time, and before that, Christmas had been the only time his mother and father had gotten along, and before that, Christmas had been when Jonathon woke him up early and snuck him red and green m&ms in his crib before their parents could catch them. Hannukah was when his mother smiled the brightest and taught them the most, because even if she wasn't a very religious person, it was part of her culture. The boys had a single Menorah to light together, because Lonnie thought it was silly, and his mother lit one on her own to show them how. Hannukah and Christmas, their own weird little combination of the two, was always a warm time for Will. He hoped Eleven could share that warm feeling this year.

"What do you hope Santa brings?" Will asked, remembering that Mike wanted Eleven to hold onto that story this year. He heard Eleven shrug.

"Happy." She said, and then he heard her roll over. Will thought a moment. He had asked for a watercolor kit. Eleven had asked for happiness.

Well, he supposed, if this Christmas was like any of the others he had experienced, she would get her wish, too.

Hopper slammed the trunk as he carted the presents he had bought into the house, the decorated and festive items shoved hastily into a garbage sack so El couldn't see what he was stuffing in the car. He knocked at the door, because he had no hands free, and when Joyce opened it she laughed.

"You look like a regular Santa Claus, Hop,"

"Ho ho ho." Hopper said with a little smile and a grouchy tone. Joyce closed the door behind him.

"Don't call me that." She grinned, and Hopper returned the smile and rolled his eyes. "What all did you get her?" She whispered as she led Hopper to the tree.

"Not enough." He sighed, beginning to pull gift after gift from the bag. Joyce's eyes widened.

"I got Jonathon a roll of film and Will watercolors. I think you got yours' plenty." She smiled. Hopper grunted from his place bent over the bag, and his back gave a little crackle when he stood.

"Don't think I forgot about the boys. I know money's tight this time of year." He pulled a few boxes that were wrapped differently from the others and set them out under the tree.

"Oh, Hop, you shouldn't have," Joyce said in an apologetic tone, smiling. Hopper shrugged and went back to unpacking gifts. Joyce looked at the array of boxes he had laid out.

"Don't you think that's enough?" Joyce laughed, a quiet, whispered laugh. Hopper sighed in return, and that caused Joyce to feel a little bit of concern.

"She's never had a real Christmas before, Joyce. Ever. That a**hole Brenner made sure of that. This time, its gotta be perfect." He said, standing and looking at all of the gifts and the now empty garbage bag. Joyce reached over and grabbed his hand.

"It'll be perfect." She whispered, and she leaned up to kiss his cheek. "She's going to love it."

Hopper smiled and stood still a moment as Joyce stayed close, but after a moment he took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back.

"Okay, now we gotta put the bike together."

"The *what*?" Joyce laughed.

"The bike. El didn't have one and all the boys do. Thought it would

be appropriate. "

Joyce swatted his arm.

"Jim Hopper, you are spoiling that girl."

After much squabbling, much cursing ("fuck!" "What?" "I dropped the screwdriver down the floor vent.", and "What the hell, what the fuck, why in the - this is absolute horse shit, " "What now?" "They didn't include the axel,") and a late night trip to the cabin for scrap wood to fashion an axel, the bike was completed, the presents were beautiful, and Joyce and Hopper were seated side by side on the couch enjoying the milk and cookies the kids had left out.

"You're doing good, Hopper. As a dad again." Joyce said through a mouthful of cookie. She turned to look him in the eyes. "I mean it. She's lucky to have you."

And then Hopper pulled Joyce into a hug, and the night was calm.

Hopper and Joyce awoke at 4 am the next morning, still curled up on the couch, to the sounds of feet pounding through the hall followed by Jonathon's voice.

"I tried to hold them back, but they were too strong! Look out!"

Will and El came barreling into the living room at max speed, and as soon as they entered they were under the tree.

Will was grateful for the gifts from his mother and hugged her tightly when he opened the watercolors and candies, but he was surprised when he saw more than he was expecting - all labeled "to Will, from Santa " in a scratchy handwriting. First he looked to Jonathon, who shook his head over his own wrapped gift that El handed him. His eyes shifted to Hopper, and before the man could resist he was wrapped in an infamous Will Byers hug.

Jonathon felt truly blessed for each each of his gifts, because he hadn't been expecting much. He felt like a little kid, opening gift after gift and still having more to go. He smiled at his mother and Hopper

and thanked them silently.

El was hesitant, taking long moments to stop and read each tag carefully and delicately ripping the paper. She ooded genuinely over each gift, her favorites being a plush doll in a pink dress and the wide array of bright eyeshadow and lipgloss.

And then came the bike. Hopper said a quaint "I think Santa left one in here, I see a ribbon," before walking the pink bicycle into the living room.

Eleven had actually begun to cry when she realized it was for her. No one had ever given her something so nice. She could finally ride around with her boys, once the year was up, all on her own.

After examining every aspect she ran to Hopper and flung her arms around his middle. She knew now who had left the presents, for many different reasons, but that didn't mean the magic had left.

"Thank you. " She whispered. He patted her back.

"What? That wasn't me, that was Santa." He retorted with a smile. El looked at him with slightly puffy eyes and made a face. Hopper laughed. "How'd you figure it out, kiddo?"

El thought a moment, back to the night before when she had lain awake. To what she heard.

"Fuck."

The rest of the day was a flurry of hugs and thank yous and hours of Hopper teaching El to ride her bike. That in itself was still a work in progress - there was much falling, and scraped knees and hands, and a whole debacle where her feet wouldn't reach the pedals and they had to get her seat lowered. Will and Jonathon then stepped in to help in teaching, and Joyce stood with Hopper for a while. After Eleven rode three feet on her own without falling, Joyce corralled them back into the house and they all sat with hot chocolate and pink noses and bright eyes for what felt like hours.

The day was magical, especially in Eleven's mind, and the little

family couldn't have asked for more.

Well, Hopper could have asked for Eleven to not be bent on repeating his midnight uttered phrases whenever she fell off her bike, but that wish would have to be fulfilled another day.

It was nearly six PM when Hopper told El to gather her things, and as she scurried off with Will to fetch her gifts, Hopper had a surprise.

"I don't think you've looked under that tree yet, little lady," Hopper said, turning to Joyce. The woman looked up from her empty mug.

"Hop, you haven't called me that since highschool," She laughed, rolling her eyes good heartedly. Hopper smiled at her, but gestured to the tree. Joyce followed his hand with her eyes and then her feet, and kneeled on the tree skirt. Within moments her hand had closed on a medium sized poorly wrapped box, and she looked up to Hopper quizzically.

"Looks like Santa remembered you this year," Hopper said. Joyce laughed as she stood up.

"Oh, f*ck." She whispered, reminding Hopper of his mistake. Hopper heaved a great sigh, thinking of the amount of times he was sure he heard El repeat the word during her lesson.

"Yeah. We'll talk about that later. For now, open that on up." Jim pointed at the box in her hands, and Joyce looked at him for a moment before tearing the paper.

When she opened the box inside, she couldn't do anything but smile. Hopper spoke up.

"Thank you for doing this, Joyce. I know it's not really your thing to do Christmas, and.. I really, really appreciate you including El and me in it. She deserves a family. A real family, like this one."

Joyce lightly touched the cool silver of the Menorah in her hands, and she delicately poked the dangling heart charm underneath the center candle. Hopper spoke again.

"Now the boys won't have to share."

She smiled up at Hopper, and reached to take his hand.

"Thank *you*, Hop. You've made the past two days magical for all of us."

Hopper rolled his eyes, because he was sure he hadn't done nearly enough, but as he did so his eyes caught something above them. His breath caught, and Joyce followed his gaze.

Mistletoe.

"Well, rules are rules," The petite woman in front of him said, and then she was leaning up for a small kiss that could not be refused. Before their lips could meet, they heard the sound of things being dropped onto the wood floor.

"Hop. Joyce." A voice said, and Hopper whipped his head around to see Eleven standing there, all of her gifts at her feet. She sat down and began tugging her shoes on before looking up at the couple. "Merry Christmas." She nodded. "Go home now."

Joyce laughed, and so did Jim.

"Well, looks like we'll be headed out." He smiled, and Joyce gave his hand a little squeeze before letting go. He kissed her cheek. "Thank you again."

"Thank you again." Eleven parroted. She gave each Byers a hug and said her goodbyes quickly, and by the time Eleven was seated in the passenger seat she was dead asleep, her eyes covered in four shades of purple and pink eye shadow, her lap covered in presents, and her hands covered with bandaids. Hopper reached over to push her hair out of her eyes and smiled.

Maybe Christmas at the Byers should become a tradition.